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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 000129

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SUBJECT: DIRECTOR'S MEETING WITH DEFENSE MINISTER LEE
TIEN-YU ON USPACOM COMMANDER'S VISIT TO CHINA

REF: 1/24/08 YOUNG-KEATING TELCON.

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,
Reason: Sec 1.4 (a/b/d)

Summary

1. (S) American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Director Stephen Young met with Minister of Defense Lee Tien-yu January 25 to brief on the USPACOM Commander's recent visit to the PRC and other defense issues. Present at the meeting were Colonel Tony Chow (LAS) and Tony Hu (TECH). Taiwan attendees included Chief of the General Staff General Huoh, Vice Minister Henry Ko, Deputy Minister Lieutenant General Lin, Chief of Staff of the Minister's Office Lieutenant General Hsiong, Director of the Strategic Planning Department Vice Admiral Tung, and Deputy Chief of the General Staff for Intelligence Lieutenant General Wang. The Director drew on notes from Admiral Keating's 24 Jan call to the Director. In addition, the Director raised the issue of the PRC's proposed civil air route near the centerline of the Taiwan Strait, President Chen's possible visit to the Spratly Islands, and praised the Taiwan military for remaining apolitical throughout this politically sensitive period. End Summary.

Admiral Keating's Visit

2. (C) Director Young informed Minister Lee that Admiral Keating approved briefing the Minister on the China visit to ensure transparency with Taiwan. The Director discussed Admiral Keating's visit itinerary. He said Admiral Keating felt the atmosphere was better than expected and that, while the Taiwan issue came up at every meeting, the tone seemed measured, less strident, and not confrontational. The Director said Admiral Keating pushed the PLA for more active transparency. Minister Lee thanked the Director for sharing the information and referenced a previous visit by an OSD representative after Secretary Gate's visit to China. He hopes this type of information-sharing will continue.

3. (C) Minister Lee thanked USPACOM for its continued support. He believes senior visits to the PRC actually benefit Taiwan as the U.S. gains better understanding of the

PRC. He particularly complimented the U.S. focus on encouraging greater transparency for the PLA as it continues its modernization drive.

Taiwan Strait Civil Air Route

14. (C) Director Young told Minister Lee that we (U.S. and Taiwan) seemed to have made progress on the Taiwan Strait air route issue. China seems to be backing down from the implementation of the centerline civil air route for the immediate future. The Director thanked Taiwan for bringing the matter to AIT's attention. Minister Lee said he believes the PLA has had second thoughts on the air route because it would give Taiwan early warning of an attack if an exclusion zone is issued.

F-16 and More

15. (C) Using the air route as a lead-in, Minister Lee reiterated Taiwan's interest in a U.S. sale of the F-16C/D and precision munitions. He said over 300 modern Russian-made fighters are positioned within striking distance of Taiwan; however their readiness rate is low. He said it will take time for the PRC to become skillful with the new systems. Minister Lee said the procurement of the aircraft will demonstrate Taiwan's determination for self-defense. He also said that Taiwan has allocated over \$300M for spare parts and logistics support in the 2008 budget to increase the readiness rate of the current fighters. Minister Lee entered into a lengthy discussion on his concerns for the

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future. He expressed concern over Taiwan's ability to retain air superiority in the future if it must count on the IDF, Mirage, and F-16A/B. He said Taiwan needs the F-16C/D now and the Joint Strike Fighter 10-15 years from now.

Spratly Islands

16. (C) Director Young inquired about recent press reports of President Chen's plan to visit the Spratly Islands where Taiwan recently constructed an airfield on Itu Aba (Taiping Dao). Minister Lee did not directly answer the question but said the Republic of China (ROC) has laid claim on Taiping Dao since 1956 when ROC Marines landed on the island. Minister Lee said that there are currently six airfields in the Spratly Islands representing various claimant states and it is important for Taiwan to protect the sovereignty of its territories. Taiwan has removed its Marines from the island and had replaced them with Coast Guard personnel. Lee said these personnel, numbering over 200, provide humanitarian support to commercial and fishing vessels in the area. Prior to Taiwan building the airfield, it used to take 2.5 days by naval vessel to go from Taiwan to the island. Lee said with C-130s landing on the new airfield, the same one-way trip takes approximately three hours. This reduction in time is much needed in cases of medical emergencies. Minister Lee said should President Chen decide to fly to the island, he expects the biggest opposition will come from Vietnam.

Neutrality of the Military

17. (C) Director Young praised the Taiwan military for making clear its intention to remain neutral and apolitical during this politically sensitive period in the run-up to presidential elections. Minister Lee assured the Director that Taiwan's military is a nationalized military and will remain neutral in the political process.

18. (C) The Director ended the meeting by informing Minister Lee that he will be meeting Admiral Keating in Honolulu next month. Once the Director gets back, he will request another

meeting with the Minister.

Comment

¶9. (C) As with previous requests, Minister Lee made himself available to meet with Director Young on short notice. He was appreciative of the opportunity to hear from Director Young on Admiral Keating's visit. He avoided answering the question on the possible visit by President Chen to the Spratly Islands. As in almost all meetings, he asked for the F-16C/D. The meeting lasted one hour.

¶10. (SBU) This cable has been cleared by Director Stephen M. Young.
YOUNG